

**Remarks Following a Briefing on the Tornado Damage in Central States and an Exchange With Reporters**  
*December 13, 2021*

*The President.* Well, folks, as you can see, I just met with my team here. And Secretary Mayorkas of Homeland Security and my FEMA Administrator, Criswell, they were on the ground in Kentucky yesterday. And I asked for a detailed briefing on what they were able to see, what they found.

And they shared with me what they learned. And we discussed how we can do more, especially when so many people are facing immense, immense loss. And we talked about how we can accelerate and expand Federal assistance to those in desperate need.

And you saw—I mean, some of you have been there, and you've seen—you've been reporting on television, you know, the devastation, you know, before and after.

*[At this point, the President held up some photographs.]*

And this is Mayfield, Kentucky. I mean it's just devastating.

And we've already approved an emergency declaration and a major disaster declaration for Kentucky. I've spoken with the Governor several times thus far. And this gives me the tools to provide everything that we can in the Federal—from the Federal level, from expert search-and-rescue teams to immediate and longer term help with housing and cleanup, a whole range of things.

And I stand ready to do the same for the Governors of other States. As a matter of fact, I'm about to sign a—an emergency request from this—from Illinois, the Governor of Illinois, when—literally, when I finish, I'll get up and sign that.

And you know, we also asked FEMA and the key departments to surge Federal resources. The thing they most need are power, water, communication systems to get back to some sense of being able to communicate with one another as rapidly as they possibly can.

And I—as I said, I intend to travel to Kentucky on Wednesday. And with each passing day, the human impact of this devastation is just—the depth of the losses are becoming more and more apparent.

This is a town with a relatively low average income of under \$20,000 a year. It's a town that has been wiped out. But it's not the only town. It's not the only town. That path you see, it moves all the way up; it's well over a hundred miles. There's more than one route it goes.

And so, you know, we're also seeing destruction met with a lot of compassion, I'm told. Everywhere they've gone, they had people volunteering, talking, asking for—not only to get help, but how they can give some help. And so we continue to pray for everyone in Kentucky and the other States who were affected. And particularly, my heart goes out to the Governor of Kentucky, who's lost family himself. It's pretty rough stuff.

And—but we're going to get this done. We're going to be there as long as it takes to help. And the combination of State, Federal, and volunteer organizations will do everything from, eventually, not only clear the debris, but provide the necessary means to move, get schools reopened, and making sure that homes are able to be rebuilt, et cetera.

So there's a lot, a lot that needs to be done. And it's been mostly Kentucky here, but not only Kentucky. And so that's—I just want to let you know, that's what I was doing.

I haven't decided where I'm going yet. We're working out—what I indicated to the Governor, when we talked about this 2 days ago was that I don't want to be in the way. There's a lot going on. And the—when the President shows up, there's a long tail to follow with an awful lot of folks. And I just don't want to do anything other than be a value added.

But I want you to know that this administration has made it clear to every Governor: whatever they need, when they need it. When they need it, make it known to me, and we'll get it to them as rapidly—as rapidly—as we can. And that's what we're doing here in Kentucky.

We're going to have to go beyond what is available through the Federal Government. For example, if we're able to—FEMA can come up with up to \$35,000 in housing restoration. Well, there's not a lot of 35,000-dollar homes. In the meantime, we can provide everything from hotel rooms and places where folks can live in the meantime.

But there's a lot to be done, and we're just getting it underway. But we're going to work with all the Governors to make sure that we can.

Yes.

#### *Natural Disasters/Federal Response Efforts*

*Q.* Mr. President, what do you believe your own visit there can do for the people who are affected by this? And what is your concern about the longest term problems? Is it housing? What part of recovery do you worry about most?

*The President.* Well, what I worry about most in a circumstance like this—because I've been involved in responding to a lot of disasters—as a Senator, as Vice President, now as President just this year—is the peace of mind of people being able to actually put their head on a pillow, lie down in a bed, and be able to know their kids are going to be okay.

And so, with—this is a narrow path. The devastation is just stunning. I mean, there's nothing left standing, basically, along the path that goes all the way through.

You know—do you have that other—let me ask you—show that other—[inaudible]—you gave me, in terms of housing—because I think this is the best way to illustrate just how precise—I mean, go to the one that goes all the way up. Because this is—takes you—

[A staffer displayed a map on an easel.]

So, if you take a look—why don't you point out where we are here—you take a look where Mayfield, there, and Bowling Green is. That's not—we're not talking about Mayfield now, but all these yellow dots along the way are residences, and they've been wiped out. They've been wiped out. Commercial and government, historical sites, and you know, industrial sites just been wiped out.

Would you mind putting the one back up for Mayfield?

[The staffer displayed a different map.]

If you take a look, Mayfield sits in that—where that square is on the left. Well, look at all—this is just Mayfield—the city of Mayfield—residential, commercial, exempt, government and historical, agriculture, et cetera. Just—I mean, they're gone.

They're just—and some of you probably already went down there. It's just devastating. And so—and I worry, quite frankly, about—how can I say it—the mental health of these people.

You come home and you see that—if you made it. And if you haven't—if you lost someone in the meantime—you know, thank God it doesn't seem like the numbers are quite as high as were anticipated, but they're high.

You come home; you've lost your husband, wife, mother, father, children, somebody along the line; and what do you do? Where do you go? It's not like if you're making \$16,000 a year, you, you know, get on a plane and head to your relative in, you know, Washington.

But I'm being literal. That's what worries me most: the uncertainty. And it really is something that I've observed in every major disaster I've watched and been on the ground to see. It just is—it just—you can see it in people's faces.

So we just want them to know that we're going to stay as long as it takes to help them. And there's three ways that we can help. One is the Federal agencies that are available, and that's already underway. And, for example, we're setting up in all these places, for example, there are going to be—roughly how many disaster centers do you think we'll have in the State?

*Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Bennett Criswell.* We'll have Disaster Recovery Centers in all of the major impacted counties.

*The President.* So that will be one place a citizen can go. There will be, essentially, an ombudsman.

What I said to the Governors—and it surprised me that they—it pleased me, but surprised me that they repeated it is that—for example, I told the Governor of Kentucky: "I not only—I'm not expecting you to know all you need. Let us tell you what you can ask for that you haven't asked for. Let us do our job."

I mean, these large Government agencies, like the Federal, or State Governments, it's hard for people understand sometimes. "Let me go in and tell you what you can ask for." And so there is the Federal Government, the State government. There is also the nonprofits out there that have been, in fact, involved in all these disasters around the country, and they can provide help and assistance.

Right now, for example, I'm told—I hope I'm not misspeaking—that the school in Mayfield is being used for shelter now. It didn't get wiped out, but it is not going to be able to be functioning as a school soon. So what—how do you get these kids back in schoolrooms? How do you get some semblance of normalcy again?

And so we're working like the devil. I'm very, very pleased with the work that FEMA Director Criswell has done and I know that Homeland Security has done—reached out to these folks. They know we're there.

And I just want to make sure there is no sense on the part of anyone in these affected areas that they are asking something that they shouldn't ask for. Ask for whatever you think you need, and we'll find out. And if we can't provide it to you through a Government agency, we'll do our best to find out private agencies that can help, from churches, to the Red Cross, to a whole range of institutions.

But it's just—it's like when I was walking through the neighborhoods in Louisiana. I mean, you see the looks on people's faces and go to the corner where their house is just gone. People standing their yards, crying. And this was 2 days after the storm went through.

So it really is devastating. And this is the United States of America. You know, the thing that pleased me about—every one of my staff who were down there came back, at least today, and called me on the phone and said: "You know, people are all ready to help each other. They're already asking, you know, 'How can I help too?'"

So that's what I worry most about, is just getting some peace of mind and say, "Look, there is—there is a way to get from here to there." It's disaster now, but there's a way to get there, and we're going to do everything we can. And I'm sure—I believe that Congress will respond if there's an extraordinary need we don't have.

Yes, sir.

### *Climate Change/Tornadoes in Central States*

*Q.* How much of a factor do you think that climate change was in this? And do you think that will be part of the argument you make to people like Senator Manchin about why the Build Back Better bill is needed urgently?

*The President.* No, I'm not going to make that argument with him about this. Look, Joe understands. Joe has as much empathy and concern for these folks as—I mean, he's been through some real disasters in West Virginia. He understands.

And the honest to God truth is—we were discussing this—I've spent a lot of time on climate issues, and I said: "We have to be very careful. We can't say with absolute certainty that it was because of climate change."

So I'm going to be talking with—with the Environmental Protection Agency, and I'm going to talk with other agencies to determine. Fact—as a matter of fact, some of it has to do with El Niño. There's a lot of things that we don't know for certain, and I don't want to say anything that is not precisely true.

What is certain: It is one of the worst tornado disasters we've had in the country. And the second thing that's certain is that it is unusual. It is unusual how it happened, how many places it touched down, and the length of the path.

So that's all I'm prepared to talk about right now.

Yes, ma'am.

### *Federal Response Efforts/Coronavirus Prevention Efforts*

*Q.* Mr. President, this is all happening in the middle of a pandemic. How are you thinking about—will these places need more resources? Because they're also going to be dealing with, you know, possibly rising cases, possibly hospitals getting overloaded, things of that nature.

*The President.* Yes, we're going to—look, we have—I have my—the entire Federal team, not just the folks going in and making sure there's still people—we're not leaving anybody still breathing under debris. That's the immediate, immediate, urgent, urgent thing. And just to get the food, water to people who don't have it, and there's no place to get it. So that's number one.

But number two, there's a whole range of things, including the virus—including the virus—and the hospitals. I've gotten a report, but not the detail I need, about the hospitals along the path of this—of this tornado.

But you know, it's going to—we're going to have to—I'm sure I'm going to be asked to—I'm going to be asking my team to set up sites for booster shots and the whole range of things that people still—the worst part is their life has to go on as if nothing happened, because they've still got to take care of those needs, from if their kid going to get in school to whether or not they're going to be able to collect an unemployment check. Are they going to be in this—you know, all those issues.

But one of those issues will be public health, as it relates to COVID.

*Q.* Mr. President—Mr. President——

*The President.* I'll take—I'll take this one question.

*Build Back Better Act*

*Q.* Mr. President, are you willing to share anything more about what your message to Senator Manchin will be about why you would like him to agree to with the Build Back Better agenda?

*The President.* No. Look, I told you, when I speak to Senators to try to—or House Members to—or Governors, or any other elected official—to try to convince them that what I'm proposing makes sense and is not inconsistent with what they believe, I do that, and then I'll discuss it afterwards. Okay?

*Q.* Thank you, Mr. President.

*The President.* Thank you so much.

*Q.* Appreciate it, sir. Thank you.

*Q.* Thank you.

*The President.* Thanks. Thanks for your time. Thank you. I mean, it's—were any of you down there?

*Q.* Not personally. No.

*Q.* Not yet. Thank you, sir.

*The President.* Thank you. And we'll let you know when I'm going and where I'm going—*[inaudible]*. Okay?

*Q.* Yes, we look forward to that. Thank you, sir.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:18 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Andrew G. Beshear of Kentucky; and Gov. Jay R. "J.B." Pritzker of Illinois. He also referred to H.R. 5376. Also participating in the briefing were Homeland Security Adviser Elizabeth D. Sherwood-Randall; White House Deputy Chief of Staff Jen O'Malley Dillon; Director of the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs Julie Rodriguez; and National Security Council Senior Director for Resilience and Response Caitlin Durkovich.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Tornado damage in Central States, briefing; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House.

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